DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 170 761 CS 204 816

AUTHOR Reid, Neil

TITLE Is Anyone Listening?
INSTITUTION New Zealand Council for Educational Research, Wellington.
PUB DATE 78
NOTE 9p.; Set 78, Number Two, Item 11; For related document, see CS 204 817
AVAILABLE FROM New Zealand Council for Educational Research, P.O. Box 3237, Wellington, New Zealand (Single copies of Set 78, $4.00 NZ)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; Language Arts; Language Enrichment; *Language Instruction; Language Skills; *Listening; *Listening Comprehension; Listening Habits; *Listening Skills; *Program Development; Research Utilization; *Resource Guides

ABSTRACT

To remedy the lack of well-planned developmental listening programs and adequate listening instruction in New Zealand schools, the New Zealand Council for Educational Research has produced this research-based teacher guide. The following materials are included: objectives for the reading program, including seven characteristics of a good listener; base lines for assessing levels of competence and for detecting undesirable listening habits, as well as for assessing the teacher's own speaking skills; obtaining an optimal classroom listening environment; detecting possible medical problems interfering with hearing; developing a systematic, regular, and varied listening program; direct versus integrated approaches to listening instruction; and the evaluation of listening, including 20 characteristics of the bad listener. References include a list of books containing listening activities, overviews of the field, the teaching of listening, testing, research, and standards. (DF)

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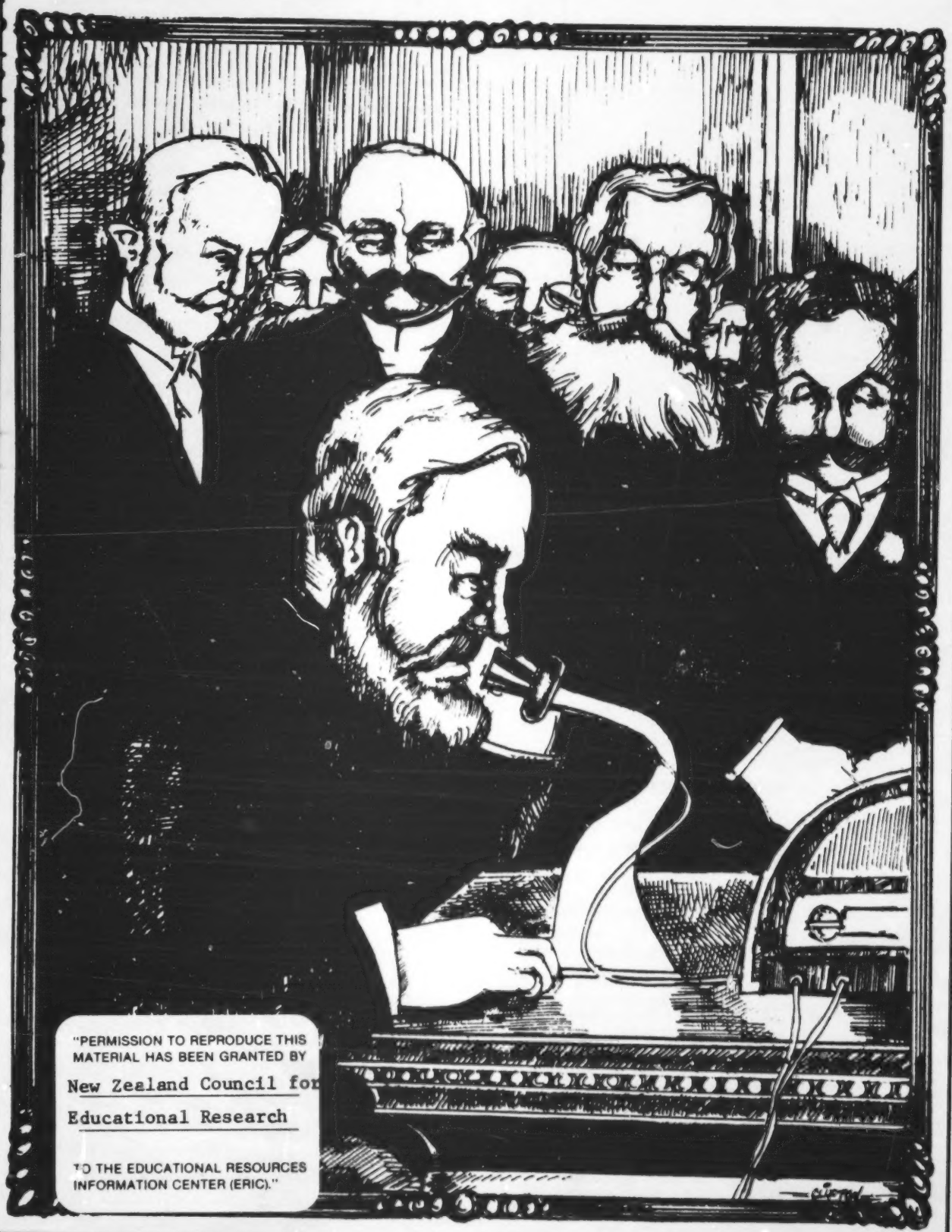
Item 11

Is Anyone Listening?

set 78
number two

ED170761



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CS 204 816

Is Anyone Listening?

by Neil Reid,
NZCER

Listening improvement programmes appear to be rare in New Zealand schools, possibly because listening is something we tend to take for granted. A case of familiarity breeds neglect perhaps? Teachers will say: 'Oh yes, listening is terribly important as a means of learning,' but if you ask what they do to actively foster and develop listening skills they often say: 'Well, no, I don't really do too much about it.' Maybe that is why a recent report on educational standards in state schools contained some rather gloomy statements on the topic:

> 'They (listening skills) are not improving, and may instead be declining slightly.'
>
> 'Very few teachers . . . take specific lessons to improve the students' listening skills.'

However, the report does say that most teachers are aware of the importance of listening; the problem appears to be that they are unsure of how to go about improving it. So it would seem that it is really lack of knowledge that produces the state of apparent neglect. To remedy that situation most of the rest of this item is devoted to discussion of the steps teachers can take to help their pupils become more accomplished listeners. But first, let's look at the question of whether it is in fact possible to *teach* children how to listen.

Listening research

Listening improvement studies are not as yet particularly numerous and, as in most other research fields, well-conducted studies are relatively few. Among these studies, however, are outlines and descriptions of programmes of planned instruction which have been used at various levels (primary, secondary and tertiary), and these report pronounced gains in listening competence, and very often in other allied language skills as well, notably reading.

The results of the only recent New Zealand experiment are also encouraging, the children in the programme improving their listening comprehension ability, as evidenced by performance on tests devised especially for the study. It should be noted, however, that the subjects were low-achieving pupils of limited listening ability, and that the improvement did not significantly increase their scores on the nationally normed *PAT: Listening Comprehension Tests.*

So there is research evidence — both overseas and local — that listening skills *can* be taught. However, no matter how persuasive the evidence is, the critical step must still be taken — that of incorporating listening instruction into the language programmes.

Meaning from sound

What skills should be taught, in what sequence and what are the methods that will ensure optimum skill development? Unfortunately, there is little unanimity on these matters, but one thing is clear and that is that those who wish to improve listening competence must first understand the nature of auditory communication, usually known as 'listening', and the factors which influence it.

The process begins with an audible sound enunciated by a speaker. The sound comes from a certain distance and although the listener is not consciously aware of the fact, each word is received in bits over a brief period of time. The bits are accumulated to form a short sequence of sound which the listener recognizes as a word. Longer sequences of sound are identified as a series of words which are translated to provide meaning.

The psychological nature of this translating process is not well understood but it's obvious that complex mental activities are involved. It is important to remember the element of change and flux; listening is a fluid, constantly changing process, a group of activities all going on at once. One generally accepted and simplified explanation of what happens is as follows: first, we learn to isolate aspects of what is presented: sounds, ideas, arguments, facts, organization of material. Second, we attach meaning to these isolated aspects; this activity is usually closely associated in time with the first. Third, we integrate what we hear with our existing background of experience; this activity is partly conscious, partly unconscious, and is assisted by the difference between 'thought speed' and 'speech speed' ('thought speed' is about five times as fast as 'speech speed'). Fourth, we survey the general configuration of the old material and the new, note similarities and differences and fit the new into the old. Fifth, we interpret and evaluate what we have heard; this level is characterized by intense mental activity. Sixth, we interpolate or provide new meanings — the speaker can say only so much; we must insert, embellish, predict, and we can do this only within the bounds of what we have already. Seventh, we introspect as well as listen; this level of listening is the most difficult to attain and again makes use of the difference between 'thought speed' and 'speech speed'.

It is important for a teacher to decide what he thinks about listening — whether he considers it a complex of many skills, or as a unitary skill, for his ideas about the nature of the listening process will clearly have implications for his methods of instruction. The bulk of the available evidence supports the notion that listening skills are interdependent, and this is the view stated in the teacher's manual for the *PAT: Listening Comprehension Tests.* The nature of the interdependence, however, is by no means clear. In short, teachers may be well advised to refrain from producing minutely detailed taxonomies of listening skills to be taught in a series of listening lessons. Rather they should perhaps concentrate on developing, through general language work, broad skills such as listening for main ideas, details, emphasis, and other speaker cues, detecting bias and so on.

Objectives

In any case, before a teacher begins to plan a listening programme, he or she will have to decide what the objectives

of the programme are to be. What kinds of behaviour should be developed? What should the pupils be able to do? Numerous statements concerning goals and aims are available, and these could be summarized as follows:

> The chief aim of listening instruction should be to develop a listener who not only knows *how* to listen but who actually *does* listen; one who in actively listening is selective, attentive, critical, courteous, curious and reflective.

In detail, a good listener:

1. Not only knows how to listen but also knows how to engage actively in listening. An analogous example would be the pupil who can read and who does read voluntarily — for pleasure, for information or another purpose — outside the school.
2. Is selective and discriminating in his listening. The teacher's responsibility here is the same as in reading: not only to teach the skills required but also to inculcate discrimination in the use of skills.
3. Is attentive, able to concentrate his thoughts on what is being said. This is more difficult than may at first appear, since a conscious effort is required to eliminate distractions and personal considerations. Because of the difference between 'speech speed' and 'thought speed' it is very easy to let the mind wander, to go off on a tangent. However, it does seem probable that the habit of concentration can be developed with practice.
4. Is critical of his listening. This does not mean to be sceptical, or lacking in open-mindedness. In critical listening there is awareness of the speaker's motives and biases; his use of emotionally-toned words, catch-phrases, half-truths, and the notorious devices of propaganda. To a large extent the listener is employing the same array of skills that he should be developing and using in his reading. Most teachers would probably agree with Duker's statement, 'I cannot subscribe to the idea that children are ever too young to learn that everything is not necessarily true just because it has been written or said.'
5. Is courteous and considerate in his listening. This includes not only his willing response to the speaker but also that he does not distract his fellow-listeners. There is no parallel to this quality in reading since a book can be put down at any time and taken up again later without offence to anyone; but the effect on a speaker of a rude and inattentive audience is usually disconcerting — unless he is speaking through a radio or TV set. In this latter case, the listener may switch off the set at will, leave the room, or engage in some other activity. Teachers and parents may care to pause here, to consider how this behaviour, learned very young, can lead to discourteous listening in the classroom.
6. Questions as he listens. He should be able to make use of the difference between 'speech speed' and 'thought speed' to ask himself whether or not what he is listening to fits with his past experience, what points the speaker is stressing, the details he is using to support these, how much is fact and how much opinion, and so on. He should be more than a 'human sponge' soaking up information uncritically; he should be actively curious in his attitude, but at the same time withhold the final evaluation until all has been said.
7. Is able to reflect on what he has heard, to integrate this with what he already knows of the subject and his feelings and attitudes towards it, in much the same fashion as he would in his reading.

Base lines

Obviously, any programme designed to improve pupils' listening abilities must begin from where the children are now. Only one New Zealand standardized test is available, the *PAT: Listening Comprehension Test*, so there is no choice as far as a valid, formal measure goes. But to assess levels of competency in the various skill areas, or of particular skills, as well as to detect undesirable habits, the teacher will have to devise her own tools — listening inventories, questionnaires, checklists or structured observational schedules. Here are some of the questions she will need to ask:

1. Do my pupils get ready to listen? Do they know what they are to listen for, i.e., are the purposes known?
2. Do they give their undivided attention to the speaker?
3. Do they have good standards of listening?
4. Do they have good listening manners?
5. Do they know how to use their other senses to increase understanding of what they hear?
6. Do they endeavour to think with the speaker?
7. Can they select the main idea or theme?
8. Can they recall the correct sequence of things?
9. Can they recognize the speaker's purpose, plan or pattern?
10. Are they able to impose an organizational pattern on what they hear?
11. Are they able to distinguish essential from non-essential ideas in oral presentation?
12. Can they distinguish fact from opinion?
13. Are they able to draw appropriate conclusions from what they hear presented?
14. Can they recognize the same idea repeated in different words?
15. Are they able to anticipate the speaker?
16. Are they sensitive to emotionally-toned words and phrases?
17. Can they detect speaker bias and prejudice?
18. Can they relate unfamiliar words to the context to derive meaning?
19. Are they able to follow oral directions?
20. Can they carry a message orally and pass it on accurately to another person?
21. Can they retell what they hear?
22. Can they summarize oral instructions?
23. Can they detect fine discriminations in sounds and speak these accurately?
24. Are they able to take brief notes to assist recall of an extended presentation?
25. Do they derive pleasure from listening? Gaining information is, after all, not the sole purpose of listening.

These questions can be asked of a class, a group within the class or even of individual pupils.

The teacher's role

The teacher is supposed to be the model of a mature, adult listener. It is therefore important that the teacher herself

display good listening habits and set an example to her pupils, so that children can become aware of the desirability of good standards of listening and strive to attain these. Most importantly, as she assesses her pupils' listening skills, she should also assess her own *speaking* skills, asking questions of the following kind:

1. How much classroom time do I spend in talking (and the children in listening to me)? It has been found repeatedly by researchers that teachers monopolize talking in the classroom, and 'telling' is not necessarily 'teaching'.
2. How much time do I spend in listening (attentively?) to children speaking? Do I make myself available so that children may discuss their concerns with me?
3. How long do I expect children in my classroom to be able to listen to me speak without a noticeable decrease in their listening efficiency. Ten, 20, 30 or more consecutive minutes? As teachers, we have to be careful not to inadvertently foster the belief that good listening requires the listeners to remain silent the whole time. We have to remember that listening is an interactive process, and that children must be encouraged to ask questions if they do not understand fully.
4. What do I do to set an example as a 'good' listener?
5. Do I consciously speak at the most comfortable rate to suit myself, or my audience?
6. What is my most comfortable speaking rate (in words per minute)?
7. Do I vary my speech rate according to the difficulty level of the material and the sophistication of the group I am speaking to?
8. Do I consciously make effective use of voice, facial expression and gesture to assist my audience to understand more readily?
9. What does my voice sound like to my audience? Well modulated, able to convey expression and warmth? A teacher's voice is probably the most important educational aid he or she has — but it is also liable to distortion through fatigue, boredom and irritation. Woman teachers in particular must guard against their voices becoming strident. If the day starts to turn sour, lower the pitch.
10. Am I aware of personal mannerisms that may distract my audience?

Classroom conditions

As well as evaluating her own impact on the listening skills and habits of her pupils the teacher should also take account of conditions within and without the classroom that influence the quality of the listening environment. For example, it is important to ensure that noise is kept at a reasonable level (that purposeful, busy hum of the smoothly functioning classroom?) so that neither teacher nor pupils need to raise their voices unduly.

Some classrooms in noisy locations may require acoustic treatment or, if the whole room cannot be modified, it may be possible to set up study carrels or listening posts, which will not only cut down on noise but also reduce visual distractions. Teachers can ensure also that interruptions to the listening climate from outside the classroom are kept to a bare minimum, by requesting more consideration from others. This would include banning those maddening intercom announcements, children entering the classrooms on trivial, non-essential business and caretakers who insist that they must mow the lawn outside your window during class time!

Maybe they can't hear?

It seems to be a painful fact that in our modern society a good many children, particularly in rural regions and some urban localities, suffer from untreated ear infections of varying severity. So it is necessary for teachers to be alert to the possibility that a pupil's poor listening performance may be caused by permanent or temporary hearing loss.

Watch for pupils who turn their heads when listening. They may be favouring the better ear. Take note of children whose voices are typically too loud or too soft, and those who prefer the volume of tape recordings or broadcast lessons at an abnormally high level. Consider also those children who have trouble with pronunciation and articulation. It may be that their problem stems from an inability to hear the sounds properly. Frequently, speech problems and listening difficulties are linked. Teachers would be wise to check the medical history of children suspected of defective hearing. While very few children are likely to have a hearing loss of greater than 20 decibels a medical examination should always be requested if impaired hearing is suspected. Accurate diagnosis is crucial in such cases, 'home-grown' whispering tests or teacher-devised hearing tests are not recommended, and professional assistance (audiologist, doctor, school nurse, speech therapist) is available.

Developing a programme

Having determined that the listening environment in the classroom is satisfactory, checked that her students have no medical problems, evaluated her own performance and assessed the competencies of the class, the next step is to develop a programme. In doing so, it is important that the following points be kept firmly in mind:

1. Instruction must be systematic and regular. Carroll has stated that 'it is probable that teaching listening is mainly a matter of training that leads the child to pay more attention to what he hears and to organize meanings for better retention, comparison and inference.' Although a certain amount of growth will undoubtedly result from attention paid to listening attitudes, habits and skills in daily instruction and a conscious effort to improve the listening climate of the classroom, greater growth is likely to be achieved by systematic and planned instruction. Certainly, if instruction is desultory and haphazard it is inevitable that learning will be unsatisfactory.
2. Opportunity to practise the skills must be planned for to ensure mastery and consolidation.
3. Variety is vital, both in the instructional approaches employed and in the oral situations presented. Why not enrich the listening environment by presenting material such as newscasts, radio commercials, broadcast lessons, drama, conversations, story telling, oral reports, debates, interviews, etc., delivered by the class teacher, other teachers in the school, visiting speakers, children from the class and from other classes, tape recorder, intercom system, radio, videotape, phonograph recordings, sound

Lundsteen, Sara W., *Listening: Its Impact on Reading and the Other Language Arts*, National Council of Teachers of English/Clearinghouse on the Teaching of English, 1971.
A mine of authoritative information and practical suggestions. Chapter 4, 'What About Measurement for Classroom Diagnosis?' Chapter 5, 'Materials and Teaching Techniques', and the appendix, with sample lesson plans and simple evaluation techniques are particularly valuable.

Ontario Teachers' Federation, *Individualizing Language Arts* Ontario Teachers' Federation, 1973; New Zealand Educational Institute, 1976.
Listening skills are discussed under 14 topics and practical hints provided.

Russell, D.H. and E.F., *Listening Aids Through the Grades*, Australian Council for Educational Research, 1964.
An excellent collection of nearly 200 listening activities and notes on useful allied materials. A must for the primary teacher.

Smith, J.A., *Creative Teaching of the Language Arts in the Elementary School*, Allyn and Bacon, 1967.
Crammed with practical ideas and specific suggestions for developing listening skills. Includes many useful references for stories, poems, records and tapes. Chapter 4 provides a somewhat different look at listening.

Taylor, Stanford E., *Listening*, National Education Association, 1973.
Provides sample activities under the following headings: Directing and Maintaining Attention, Following Directions, Listening to the Sounds of our Language, Using Auditory Analysis, Using Mental Reorganization, Using Context in Listening, Distinguishing Relevant and Irrelevant Information, Listening with a Purpose, Finding Main Ideas and Important Details, Indexing an Aural Message, Making Comparisons in an Aural Message, Finding Sequence in an Aural Message, Making Inferences and Drawing Conclusions, Forming Sensory Images from Oral Desciption, Sensing Emotions and Moods through Words used and Through Manner of Delivery, Critical Listening and Appreciative Listening. The illustrative examples given by Taylor are bound to stimulate ideas for further listening activities.

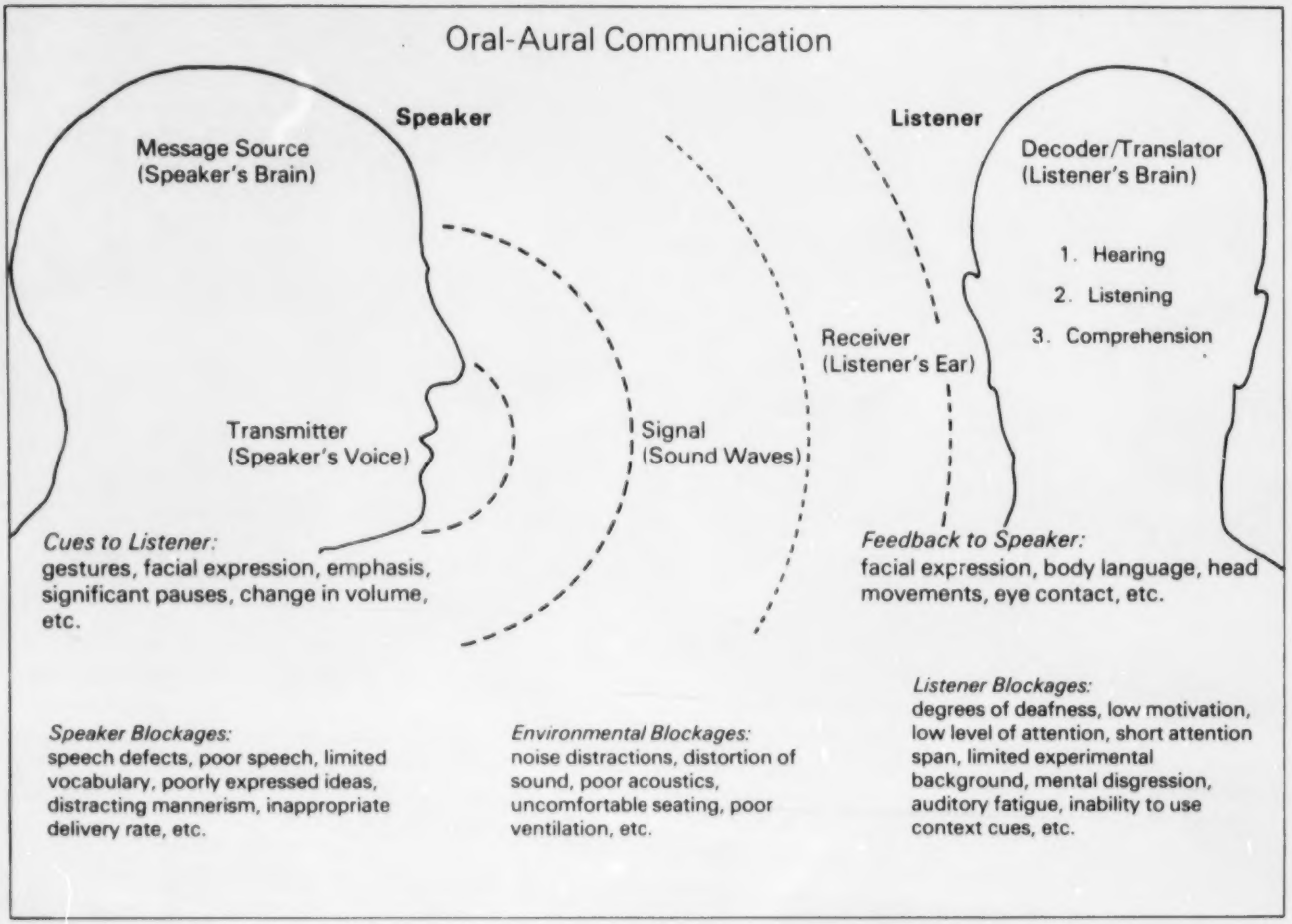
Wagner, G. et al., *Listening Games*, Macmillan, 1960.
Reprinted 13 times, which indicates its popularity. While the activities are more suitable for younger children there are plenty of ideas for intermediate pupils.

Published programmes in the form of multi-level, multi-skill kits or taped programmes are available also. Science Research Associates have three on the market at present: *Listening Skill Builder Tapes* (for use with the well-known *SRA Reading Laboratories*), *Listening Language Laboratory Series* and *Listening-Doing-Learning* tapes. Another aid is the *Michigan Language Programme* developed by Learning Research Associates, and there are probably others available that have not been widely publicized in this country. It would be wise to carefully evaluate these programmes before purchase, however, as there are pronunciation and accent problems. (Perhaps the local branch of the International Reading Association, or the Department of Education district advisers could be persuaded to critique kits for interested teachers?) Many teachers will also know the *Readers Digest Skill Builders* and appreciate their usefulness. Audio lessons are available with the new series and listening comprehension skills are included. The authors claim that the programmes assist children 'to listen attentively, thus sharpening their ability to follow directions and comprehend the sounds of others.' Again, it would be wise to evaluate thoroughly before purchase.

School broadcast lessons to stimulate listening for younger pupils have been on the air for something like 12 years under a variety of titles. Now a very promising start has been made with a series of radio programmes for the middle school, scripted by Doug Hastings and entitled *What was that?* (1977) and *Be swift to hear* (1978). Helpful teachers' notes are available and teacher feedback has been actively solicited so that future programmes will be even more relevant and useful. Incidentally, these programmes depend for their success on the use of tape *recorders* (yes, they are recording instruments, not simply machines for playing tapes!) and teachers must be encouraged to use them as such.

A few instructional films and filmstrips on listening are also available. These would probably be most effectively used in arousing pupil interest and in heighting awareness of the world of sound we live in.

Effective Listening. Suggestions for overcoming obstacles to good listening. 15 mins. Secondary level.


Oral-Aural Communication
Speaker
Listener
Message Source
(Speaker's Brain)
Decoder/Translator
(Listener's Brain)
1. Hearing
2. Listening
3. Comprehension
Receiver
(Listener's Ear)
Transmitter
(Speaker's Voice)
Signal
(Sound Waves)
Cues to Listener:
gestures, facial expression, emphasis, significant pauses, change in volume, etc.
Feedback to Speaker:
facial expression, body language, head movements, eye contact, etc.
Speaker Blockages:
speech defects, poor speech, limited vocabulary, poorly expressed ideas, distracting mannerism, inappropriate delivery rate, etc.
Environmental Blockages:
noise distractions, distortion of sound, poor acoustics, uncomfortable seating, poor ventilation, etc.
Listener Blockages:
degrees of deafness, low motivation, low level of attention, short attention span, limited experimental background, mental disgression, auditory fatigue, inability to use context cues, etc.

film and so on? Undoubtedly, increased variety will result in greater flexibility in listening, one of the highly desirable outcomes of any listening programme.

4. Many pupils, as a result of home and school experience, will have already formed poor attitudes toward listening. For younger children, providing activities which emphasise careful, attentive listening will probably change attitudes in the desired direction. But with older pupils, undesirable attitudes may be firmly entrenched and specific approaches will be required in order to modify and revise them. It would appear that the first step should be to sensitize children to the vital importance of listening as a tool for learning and to awaken in them an awareness that they are not the efficient listeners that they might be. Teacher-led discussions, formal and informal tests, pupil self-report techniques (numerous checklists are available or are easily constructed), pupil-kept records of class and out-of-class time devoted to listening, having children think about the types of listening they do and the various purposes for their listening, are some suggested teacher strategies. Once pupils have realized the need for improvement in their attitudes, habits and listening skills the way is clear to develop these along appropriate lines.

Approaches to teaching

Two main approaches may be considered by the New Zealand teacher, each with supporting research evidence. Either he can teach listening skills directly, setting aside classroom time for specific lessons on listening, or he can integrate listening with his language programme or total programme as he sees fit. From comments made by Departmental advisers, inspectors and specialist language teachers, it appears that the latter approach is widely favoured at present.

Listening activities and exercises

Whatever the approach, and whether it involves individual and independent use of instructional materials or small group or whole class lessons, teachers wishing to embark on a programme of listening improvement will find the content suggestions in the publications listed below invaluable.

Duker, Sam,	*Teaching Listening in the Elementary School: Readings*, Scarecrow Press, 1971. For an overview there is no better book available.
Green, H.A. and W.T. Petty,	*Developing Language Skills in the Elementary School*, 4th edition, Allyn and Bacon, 1971. Chapter 6 provides an excellent summary of issues involved in developing listening skills. Eight pages are devoted to listening lessons and activities. Offers good advice and suggestions for the primary school teacher.

Characteristics of the Bad Listener

1. Inattentive, fidgety, easily distracted.
2. Adept at 'faking' attention while letting the mind wander.
3. Allows personal worries and concerns to distract attention; day dreams.
4. Listens passively, lets the words wash over him without any reaction other than bare recognition.
5. Reacts to the speaker's appearance, mannerisms, delivery, etc., instead of concentrating on what he has to say.
6. Dismisses the speaker's subject as being unimportant before assessing its value.
7. Allows prejudice and bias to interfere with his evaluation of the speaker's message.
8. Forms a judgement long before he has heard enough to do so.
9. Listens only to what supports his opinions.
10. Listens uncritically; fails to evaluate the message and fit it in with his own experience.
11. Over-reacts to emotionally toned words, missing what follows immediately after.
12. Interrupts a speaker's message before he has completed it.
13. Ignores or is unaware of the additional cues provided by the speaker to assist comprehension, for example, gestures, pauses, emphasis, cue words or phrases such as 'There are three main points . . .' or 'The most difficult problem is . . .'
14. Fails to provide any feedback to the speaker in the form of facial expressions, head movements, posture, applause, sounds of assent or disapproval, etc.
15. Listens at one level only. Makes no attempt to adjust to the difficulty of the material or to changes in the speaker's rate of delivery.
16. Allows himself to be distracted by irrelevant details.
17. Tunes out when anything 'difficult', particularly expository material is presented. Listens only for facts or easily memorized portions of a passage.
18. Attempts to hold all the details of a message in memory without making any efforts to isolate the main ideas or general theme.
19. Attempts to take verbatim notes; fails to evaluate what is worthwhile recording and what is not.
20. Fails to utilize effectively the often marked difference between the speaker's rate of delivery and the speed of his thought processes.

Listening. Designed to sharpen children's awareness of aural experiences about them. 14 min. Colour. Primers to secondary level.
Listening Skills: An Introduction. Stresses importance of skills. 11 min. Intermediate and secondary levels.

Of course, with all materials, sensible teachers will adapt, rather than adopt, what is offered, tailoring it to their own needs and those of their pupils.

Evaluating listening abilities

An essential phase of any instructional programme is evaluation. As far as listening instruction is concerned much of the evaluation will necessarily be of an informal nature, accomplished largely through keen and sensitive teacher observation. For example, the teacher who adjusts his speech rate to suit the group he is talking with has made an informal assessment of his listeners' competencies; so has the teacher who modifies his oral questioning in the light of the feedback he gets from his listeners' responses and non-verbal cues. The principal who asks a child to repeat his instructions is also checking, informally, on that child's retention of main ideas and specific details and on his listening comprehension.

Other informal indicators that what is being taught is having an effect on individual children or on the class as a whole are: discernible positive changes in attitudes towards listening; increased attention span; 'higher' and more penetrating levels of pupil questioning; the withering away of bad habits; the blossoming of recognizably better ones; an expectant 'air' in the classroom before someone speaks; an improved memory span, as evidenced by accurate recall of lengthy sequences and specific details; the production of comprehensive oral summaries, and so on.

Many of the instructional activities described in the references provided can be adapted readily, or parallel ones devised, for use as informal checks of listening competence. If more formal, pencil-and-paper measures are required, these can be modelled on existing published materials or they can be constructed to fit the specific assessment situation. And, of course, good teaching should eventually be reflected in improved scores on standardized achievement tests of listening comprehension.

Conclusion

Despite the genuine efforts of some teachers to improve the listening skills of their pupils it appears that there is still a negligible amount of instruction provided in listening in our schools, and a lack of well-planned, developmental listening programmes. Until teachers cease to pay lip service to the need for listening skills, and make a concerted effort to do something decisive in this vitally important area, listening will continue to be the Cinderella of the communication skills.

References and Reading Suggestions

The most comprehensive overview of the whole field of listening is provided by:

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Cover illustration by Gordon Clifton

SO PLEASE REMEMBER WHAT I JUST TOLD YOU CLASS
WE WILL MISS McALPINE
JONATHAN AREN'T YOU LISTENING TO MISS McALPINE
NO. I'VE FOUND THAT IF ITS REALLY IMPORTANT THEY'LL REPEAT IT

John Griffiths